

Rain Barrels Without Slipping Up

Have you ever wished you could lower your water bill? Are you concerned about algae in local streams and lakes? If so, you may be interested in a rain barrel. Rain barrels are a form of stormwater detention that collects water from roofs and stores some of it to later water plants. Many households use more than a third of their water bill watering the yard and garden: so a rain barrel can be a great way to save money. Properly installed rain barrels can also reduce erosion, and rain water is naturally soft and better for plants than tap water. Most rain barrels are made of recycled 50 gallon plastic barrels; but any large container made of a non-porous material, such as a clean plastic trash can, will do. There are a few things to keep in mind to make sure your rain barrel functions properly and doesn't cause problems of its own.

Firstly, it's important to plan for overflow. A small 10'x10' shed produces 60 gallons of runoff in a 1 inch rain, and larger buildings produce even more. It's important to plan for overflow, and attach an overflow outlet and hose so the gutters don't back up when the barrel fills. Make sure the overflow hose points away from the foundation of the building, and that the water can flow into a drainage ditch, stream, or storm drain. The overflow hose will need to have an overflow area with a cement splash plate or rocks to stop the water from eroding the yard (just like a gutter downspout).

The rain barrel will need to be placed on a level platform, both to keep it from settling unevenly and to make sure the water can flow out. If you plan on watering your garden with a watering can, the spigot at the bottom of the barrel needs to be higher than your tallest can. If you plan to use a hose; the barrel should be higher than the highest point in the garden, and the hose should be a soaker hose. The platform also needs to be strong enough to support the full rain barrel. 50 gallons of water weighs over 400 pounds, and multiple barrels will weigh even more. Probably the easiest way to build a platform is to select a smooth patch of ground under a downspout (on a shady side of the house if possible, to keep the water from getting too hot and to prevent algae) and stack cement blocks a couple of feet high on the level ground.

It's important to cover all the openings in the barrel with window screen to keep out mosquitoes and other insects. It's also a good idea to use up the water in the barrel on a regular basis, in order to prevent algae growth. Remember to close the spigot when the barrel is drained so that it can fill up with water again when it rains. Since rain water collects bacteria, it's important to remember the water stored in the rain barrel is not safe to drink. Use it to water plants or the yard.

Finally, rain barrels need to be winterized. Before a freeze, the barrel needs to be drained and the spigot opened to prevent ice dams. Every fall, remove the barrel, clean out any sediment inside, and rinse it with either a weak bleach solution or with a mixture of half vinegar-half water in order to kill any bacteria.

Rain barrels can be a great way to save money while keeping our streams beautiful. They are easy to build and maintain, and they reduce erosion while keeping yards and gardens healthy. Step-by-step instructions to build a rain barrel are available at https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/ksmo_buildarainbarrel.pdf or as brochures from the City of Moberly. Call 660-353-9745 to receive a brochure for free, or check the brochure racks at Moberly City Hall, the Household Hazardous Waste Facility, or the Library.